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THE TEACHING OF JESUS.

II. THE METHODS OF HIS TEACHING.

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The synoptic Gospels the most satisfactory source.—Teaching popular in style,—use of examples,—of action,—of comparisons,—of the parable.—Parable defined,—“parable-germs” and parable-stories.—The parable as distinguished from the fable,—the myth,—the proverb,—the allegory.—Interpretation.—The allegorical method and its absurdities.—A sound general principle.—The usual subject of the parable.

We can, no doubt, best determine what were the methods of Jesus' teaching by studying the tradition of his words which has been preserved in the synoptic Gospels. We must, I think, concede that in the fourth Gospel the form of the teaching has been much modified by the writer's reflection. This supposition does not affect the substantial trustworthiness of the representation of Jesus' teaching there given, but concerns rather the conception which we are to entertain of its form and method.¹

Looking, then, at the sayings of Jesus as presented in the first three Gospels, we observe, in the first place, that his teaching was popular in style. It was largely embodied in pithy, pointed sayings which were designed and adapted to impress the popular mind. He taught rather by suggestion than by presenting a full and systematic view of any subject. It is unlikely that the long discourses which are reported in the Gospels were, in all cases, spoken at one time. In the preservation of his teaching in oral and written tradition it would naturally happen that sayings which were kindred would be joined together, even if spoken at different times. This would happen the more easily because in many cases it could not be known when some of the words that had been preserved were uttered.

¹ The method of Jesus' teaching is fully discussed in Wendt's *Teaching of Jesus*, Vol. I., pp. 106-151 and in the introductory chapters of Trench's work on the Parables.

It is almost demonstrable that something like this has happened in what we call the sermon on the mount. A considerable part of the discourse (especially of its later portion) is found in different places in the gospel of Luke—and found in definite historic situations which are particularly described. It seems, therefore, almost certain that the sermon on the mount, though in the main one discourse, includes many sayings which were spoken at different times.

Our Lord frequently taught by the use of examples. Several illustrations are found in Matt. 5. He there explains the nature of true righteousness by citing examples, either from the Old Testament or from Rabbinic teaching, of maxims which were either imperfect or inadequate in themselves, or were imperfectly or erroneously applied by the people. Other instances of teaching by example are found in the narrative of the man who was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell among robbers (Luke 10:30 *sq.*), the story of the rich man whose ground brought forth plentifully and who said to his soul: "Take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry" (Luke 12:16 *sq.*), in the account of the Pharisee and the Publican praying in the temple (Luke 18:10 *sq.*), and in the casting into the Temple treasury of the two mites by the poor widow (Mark 12:41 *sq.*). All these are examples of events which either actually happened or which might naturally happen. Some of them may be parables but they are so life-like that they may well be narratives of actual events.

Jesus sometimes taught by action, as when he took a child in his arms in order to emphasize the necessity of childlikeness in those who would be members of his kingdom (Mark 9:33 *sq.*). Another impressive example of this method of teaching is found in the narrative of his washing the disciples' feet as an object-lesson in humility (John 13:12 *sq.*). The cursing of the barren fig tree (Mark 11:13 *sq.*) may be called a parable in action on account of the somewhat dramatic and didactic character of the event.

Another of the methods of Jesus was the use of comparisons. He says, for example, that one must receive the kingdom of heaven as a little child (Mark 10:15), and he depicts his own

affection for the sacred city, Jerusalem, by saying: "How often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her own brood under her wings" (Luke 13:34).

But of all the methods of teaching which Jesus employed his use of the parable is the most interesting. A parable is a narrative of some real or imaginary event in nature or in common life, which is adapted to suggest a moral or religious truth. The parable rests upon some correspondence, more or less exact, between events in nature or in human experience and the truths of religion. Wendt distinguishes two classes of parables, (1) those in which some fact in the actual world is adduced as illustrating a moral or religious principle, and, (2) those in which some imagined event—which might naturally happen—is narrated to illustrate a spiritual truth or process. Examples of the former sort of parables are: "They that are whole have no need of a physician, but they that are sick" (Mark 2:17); "Can the sons of the bride-chamber fast, while the bridegroom is with them?" (Mark 2:19); and the sayings about the sewing of undressed cloth upon an old garment (Mark 2:21), about the division of a kingdom against itself (Mark 3:24), and about the putting of the lamp under the bushel, or under the bed, instead of upon the lamp stand (Mark 4:21). In John also this species of parable is found, as in 3:8 and in 12:24.

These forms of teaching are brief, undeveloped parables; they have been sometimes called "parable-germs." They are not elaborated into a narrative or story, but are succinct statements of natural events or customs which readily suggest some religious fact or principle. In popular usage these "parable-germs" are not generally spoken of as parables at all; but it is evident that they really come under that designation, and they are sometimes so called in the New Testament (*e. g.*, in Mark 3:23).

It is the second class of parables—the parable-stories—which excite the most interest in the New Testament student. No parts of the Bible are more familiar to us, and I need only mention the parable of the sower (Mark 4:3 *sq.*), that of the vineyard (Matt. 21:28 *sq.*), and that of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11 *sq.*) in illustration.

The nature of the parable can, perhaps, be best illustrated by comparing it briefly with some other figurative forms of speech. The difference between the parable and the *fable* is readily observed. The fable moves on a lower plane. It is less serious and dignified, both in its choice of material and in the lesson which it aims to teach. One need but recall the fables of Æsop in illustration. They are mainly constructed out of impossible transactions and conversations of animals. The lessons which they teach are, for the most part, lessons of prudential morality. The parable, on the other hand—at least, as Jesus uses it—is devoted to teaching the highest kind of spiritual truths. Moreover, it is constructed of what I may call natural materials, events which either happen in nature or life, or circumstances which might, at any rate, occur without the least violation of reason or nature. The fable, then, is a product of free fancy teaching a prudential lesson; the parable is a natural narrative teaching some deep moral or religious principle.

Even more widely does the parable differ from the *myth*. Let the reader recall the myths of the Homeric poems, the fanciful stories of gods and heroes which constituted the early literature of the Greeks. When we read them in our youth we often wondered whether they were all true, or all false, or half true and half false. In the myth the truth intended to be conveyed and the story employed to convey it are identified. The myth has on the guise of truth. It offers itself to us as the truth and affords us no ready means of distinguishing between its form and its substance, as respects its truthfulness. In the myth the fancy loses the truth in its own creations. The parable, on the contrary, carefully preserves the distinction between its form, the parable story, and its essence, the spiritual truth intended to be illustrated. Although both the myth and the parable are forms of fiction, they differ very widely since the myth is far removed from our common human nature and reason, while the parable keeps close to them.

The *proverb* differs from the parable, as a rule, in being briefer. The proverb commonly relates to custom and to practical wisdom, and seldom deals with truths which are distinctly religious. The

proverb may, however, be figurative or parabolic in form and capable of being elaborated into a parable. Such a proverb is seen in the words: "If the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch." A parable might certainly be constructed by developing in a story form the idea of one blind man leading another, in such a way as to teach the importance of seeking trustworthy guidance in life and duty.

The *allegory* is the form of speech which most closely resembles the parable. The narrative about the door of the sheepfold in John 10 is often called a parable, often an allegory. I suppose it is properly called an allegory because the allegory identifies the symbol and the thing signified: "I *am* the door; I *am* the true vine." The parable, on the other hand, keeps these distinct. If a parable were to be made out of the materials of the allegories just referred to, there would be some narrative about the door and the sheep or about the vine and the branches, suggestive of some religious truth, which would, however, be quite distinct from the parable-story. The allegory hides the truth in the figurative form; the parable suggests it. Trench illustrates the difference by saying that, "Behold the Lamb of God" is allegorical, because Christ is *identified* with the Lamb, while "Brought as a Lamb to the slaughter" is parabolical, because it is a *comparison* and not an identification. It will thus be seen that an allegory needs no interpretation, since it carries its meaning on its surface, whereas the meaning of a parable, being only *suggested*, may be more or less evident.

I will conclude this comparison of the parable with other figurative forms of speech in the words of Trench, to whose discussion I am mainly indebted: "To sum up all, then, the parable differs from the fable, moving as it does in a spiritual world, and never transgressing the actual order of things natural—from the *mythus*, there being in the latter an unconscious blending of the deeper meaning with the outward symbol, while the two remain separate and separable in the parable—from the proverb, inasmuch as it is more fully carried out, and not accidentally and occasionally, but necessarily figurative—from the allegory, comparing as it does one thing *with* another, but at the same time preserving

them apart as an inner and an outer, and not transferring, as does the allegory, the properties and qualities and relations of one *to* the other."

Something may next be said of the interpretation of the parables. The most diverse methods have been employed among scholars in seeking their meaning, and, I suppose, a great variety of results would be derived from the parables in popular, practical Christian teaching. The commonest error of interpreters is to apply the "allegorical" method to the parables, that is, to seek to find some special and distinct meaning in each detail of the parable-story. To some of the parables this method can be applied with fairly plausible results, either because the parable is so simple or compact in character that it makes one indivisible picture, or because the analogy used happens to be especially complete and many-sided. In other cases, however, this method breaks down entirely. Take, for example, the parable of the rich man and the steward in Luke 16:1 *sq.* Whom does the rich man represent? Some say *God*; others, the *Romans*; others, *mammon*; still others, *the devil*, and these are but a few of the answers that have been given. Who is the steward? We find a similar variety of answers: *the wealthy, the Israelitish people, sinners*, and even *Judas Iscariot*.

It is obvious that there could hardly be such wide diversity of opinion as this if there were any test or measure for determining the meaning of these terms. The truth is that it makes no difference who the rich man is or who the steward is. They represent no particular persons; that is, the point of the parable does not depend at all upon finding a counterpart for these persons. They are necessary to the parable-story, but the meaning of the parable turns on what the steward *says*, and not on who he *is*. He may be anybody, and his master may be anybody; it is the *action*, and not the *personnel* of the parable which contains its lesson. That this is so is seen from the eighth and ninth verses. The shrewdness of the steward's action may teach a wholesome lesson in the right use of wealth, although the dishonesty of his method cannot be commended.

There is no limit to the absurdities which have been drawn

from the parables by trying to make every character which is introduced into them represent some particular person in the application. Thus the servant who owed ten thousand talents (Matt. 18:23) has been held to be the Pope of Rome and the whole parable has been treated as a prophetic representation of mediæval history. Whom do the ten virgins represent? Who is the merchant seeking goodly pearls? Who is the woman who puts the leaven in the meal, and who is the one who sweeps the house in search of the lost piece of money? No answers need be sought to such questions. The force of the parables just alluded to depends upon the principle which the action described illustrates.

Let the reader test for himself the applicability of the allegorical method by trying it in the case of the parable of the unjust judge (Luke 18:2 *sq.*). Who is the judge? He cannot be God, for he is an unjust judge, who neither fears God nor regards man. Who is the widow? She cannot represent the Christian in prayer, for she is a troublesome and shameless person who threatens the judge with personal violence (see the margin of the Revised Version on the fifth verse) in case he does not grant her request. It will be found that we have here a picture which is designed to teach by the contrast of the two situations the certainty that prayer will be answered. If an unjust judge, all whose qualities are the very opposite of the character of God, at length grants the persistent applicant her request, not from any interest in her case—for he neither fears God nor regards man—but solely to escape further annoyance or danger, how much more will the gracious and loving God, our Father, grant the earnest requests of his children! This is an example of a parable which is constructed more upon a contrast than upon a resemblance. To what absurdity, then, would the effort to treat the terms as having a spiritual parallel lead.

A sound general principle for the interpretation of the parable is that it is intended to teach one single truth. The parallel between the story which embodies this truth and its spiritual counterpart may be more or less complete. The point of the teaching may lie in the whole picture which the parable presents,

or it may lie in some single aspect or element of the picture. No rule for accurately measuring the range of the correspondence can be laid down. The parable of the prodigal son and that of the sower are examples of parables whose significance is found in the entire picture which they present. No violence is therefore done in assigning a didactic value in interpretation even to the details of the parable-story; in fact we find that our Lord himself does this in explaining the import of the parable of the sower.

The general subject with which the parables most commonly deal is the kingdom of God. The numerous parables which comprise the thirteenth chapter of Matthew are good illustrations. Sometimes the parables seem to go together in pairs, teaching two closely related aspects of the same general truth. Examples are found in the parables of the mustard seed and of the leaven (Luke 13:18-21), in the parabolic sayings about the piece of undressed cloth and the new wine (Mark 2:21, 22), and in the kindred but distinguishable allegories of the door of the sheepfold (John 10:1-10), and of the good shepherd (John 10:11-18).

From these illustrations of the methods of Jesus in teaching we gain some impression of the real simplicity, concreteness and pointedness of his instruction. It is not strange that the multitudes, who had been accustomed to the subtleties and sophistries of the scribes, "were astonished at his teaching" (Matt. 7:28).